PONTIFICAL AND ROYAL
UNIVERSITY OF SANTO TOMAS
THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF THE PHILIPPINES

UST Public Relations Crisis Communication Guidelines

Crisis
MANAGEMENT

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Introduction

The University of Santo Tomas is committed to safeguard the Thomasian community and its good name as well as ensure the continued effectiveness of its academic and office operations in the immediate aftermath of a crisis that risks the University's reputation. A key element in accomplishing this is the efficient and timely flow of crisis communication.

The Office of Public Affairs of the University of Santo Tomas prepared the Crisis Communication Guidelines to provide a standardized procedure for the coordination of communication, internal and external alike, in the event of a crisis. This guide would outline the roles, duties, and protocols to assist the University in determining an appropriate communication response strategy that would mitigate negative impacts on the University's stakeholders and reputation as well as show initiative in cooperating with appropriate institutions.

Adhering to the Thomasian values of competence, commitment, and compassion, as well as the University motto of *Veritas in Caritate*, or Truth in Love, the University is highly committed to communicating with prudence, transparent honesty, and sensitivity in a timely and accessible manner. In crisis circumstances, however, clear communication may be obscured by certain situations that may appear without warning and further impeded by panic or desperation. Thus, the impetus for the design of a flexible crisis communication guideline is to enable the University to disseminate the right information at the right time, with the right stakeholders, for the right purpose with a unified voice.

Scope

This guide intends to focus on the communication and public relations aspect of crisis management. It is only a supplement to the previously printed Crisis Management Manual of Operations of the University, which deals with ensuring a safe and secure campus during emergency conditions.

Objectives

This guideline on crisis communication aims to:

- assist the crisis management committee in determining a communication response strategy;
- enable the University to disseminate accurate information and key messages in a timely manner with a unified voice;
- prevent insensitive, inaccurate, or libelous coverage of the University, its stakeholders, and its current crises;
- provide the administrators, academic officials, faculty members, and staff with a standardized guide of communication operations to minimize confusion and ease proceedings; and
- promote the use of effective communication to ensure the safety and peace of mind of Thomasians and concerned stakeholders.

Defining 'Crisis'

Within the context of this guide, the term 'crisis' shall refer to a situation that may have a significant impact on the University's operations and/or reputation, which may result in media coverage and public scrutiny, or even endanger the welfare of its stakeholders. This may take the form of various dangerous situations such as natural or man-made disasters, active shooter or hostage incidents, homicides, bomb threats, sexual or physical assault, disease outbreak, hazing, suicide attempts, legal troubles, or other such circumstances (Anthonissen, 2008).

In such cases, effective and efficient communication can affect life or death, capture or escape of perpetrators, or positive or negative coverage of the University. Hence, time is of the essence when it comes to crisis communication, and the University actively commits itself to communicating with both accuracy of information and speed.

PREPARING FOR A CRISIS

It is said that preparation is half the battle. Hence, the effectiveness of the crisis response will be greatly eased if stakeholders, especially the decision-makers, are aware of a basis for action. The following information within this guidebook must therefore be read and understood carefully *before* a crisis begins so as to enable decisive, timely, and appropriate action when one eventually occurs. While total prevention of crisis is ideal, the fact remains that there are situations outside of people's control. Thorough preparation within a proactive environment is thus a vital component in crisis management.

Forming the Crisis Communication Team

In the event of a crisis, a core group of decision-makers must determine the best path forward as well as the key message that the University will send out. The team composition is as follows:

- **The Rector** is the chief executive officer of the University.
- **The Vice-Rector for Finance** is the chair of the Crisis Management Team (CCT) and has custody of all assets of the University, and in times of crisis, decides how to direct the flow of resources.

- **The Secretary-General** conducts official correspondence of the University and oversees protocols of University-related matters.
- **The Director of the Office of Public Affairs** is responsible for public and media relations.
- **The Director of the Communications Bureau** is responsible for monitoring and managing social media online discourse and sentiments regarding the crisis.
- **The Director of Office for Student Affairs** is responsible for overseeing the welfare of students and student organizations and providing database information.
- **The Director of the Human Resource Department** is responsible for overseeing the welfare of employees and providing database information.
- **The In-house Legal Counsel** provides legal advice or drafts an official statement.
- **The Director of the UST Health Service** oversees medical aid services within the University.
- **The Detachment Commander of the Safety and Security Office** is in-charge of handling security breaches and is the point of contact should viewing of security footage be necessary.
- **The Director of the Facilities Management Office** is responsible for ensuring that physical requirements such as accommodation or transportation for people affected by the crisis are provided and that infrastructures and facilities within the University are stable and serviceable.

More relevant members are likely to be included as the specific situation necessitates, and someone may be designated as the spokesperson should an issue necessitate a more visible face for the University. ***The spokesperson***, as the face of the University during the time of crisis, must possess the communication skills and the competence in dealing with media efficiently and must work closely with the Crisis Management Team (CCT) on how to respond to media effectively and be kept well informed by the CCT.

Preparing contact sheets

A list of key people who need to be involved in the management of an incident and those who need to be informed immediately regarding developments must be prepared. Such a list must also include up-to-date office, home, and mobile phone numbers as well as university and personal email addresses.

The 24-hour contact details are a necessary alternative since time is of the essence, and updates from resource persons and CCT members are of vital necessity. Fast-paced communication is therefore expected. This list is also a contingency in case of crises that may adversely affect official University communication channels, such as earthquakes or other disasters that may weaken cellular phone signals, mobile internet signals, or disconnect landline and/or internet lines within the campus.

Members of the CCT team, as well as key officials and administrators must be part of the list.

The list must also include contact details of necessary managerial and operational support staff (from the Safety and Security Office, STePs, or other offices involved), internal and external medical services, police, and media contacts.

It must be noted, however, that these contact sheets must remain private and limited to the people who need to know, because media or other interested parties may take advantage of the contact sheets whether there is a crisis or not.

Planning contingencies for communication

As a fundamental aspect of any crisis communication plan, contingencies are plans devised for an outcome other than the one expected. During crises, such contingency plans are developed to explore eventualities so as not to be caught unprepared should such an unexpected situation arise.

The practicalities of internal and external communication in an emergency are usually the prime aspects to be considered for contingencies. The primary communication channels must be identified (e.g. internet, direct and local telephone lines, mobile phones, two-way radios, and other channels) and given sufficient alternatives.

Some questions to be answered in preparation for crisis by the crisis management committee are:

- Should certain CCT members be on leave or unavailable for any reason, to whom does their responsibility fall?
- Which communication channels would the Crisis Communication Team (CCT) be able or unable to use in the case of an emergency?
- Where can the Crisis Communication Team convene safely while remaining in touch with the situation and what equipment would be necessary for the CCT?
- Can stakeholders and CCT members access communication channels remotely (either from home, from hospitals, or within the vicinity of the University)?]
- Are the University's phone lines, emails, files, and other shared networks accessible to the people who need them from other locations?
- Can people tasked with communicating to other crisis management units do their jobs in a timely manner without impediments?

- Are lists of phone numbers, email addresses, or other contact details of CCT members available to all members of the team?
- Are conference call facilities available so that all key people can communicate during the crisis?

DEALING WITH A CRISIS

At its core, crisis communication aims to mitigate and prevent further risk to institutions in crisis. In order to accomplish this in the context of the University, the actions done to deal with a crisis must then accomplish the following general functions: address or change negative perceptions of the University with honesty and integrity; note the complaints of the public and the stakeholders and understand what areas or policies need to be improved; and prove that the University is accountable and deserving of the confidence entrusted by stakeholders to the institution.

Establishing the facts

The University must first assess the facts of the situation in order to act appropriately as the situation merits. Time is of the essence, and so is accuracy of information.

What is the crisis situation? It should be described in a short paragraph, similar to what the media would do, to help the CCT focus on the core issue.

Who are involved? Aside from the University as a whole, who are the stakeholders affected by this crisis situation?

Why did the situation happen? Apart from having a reason to give to stakeholders including the media, it is also important to determine the root cause so as to prevent any repetition.

How did the crisis situation happen? How did the crisis evolve and develop and at what point did things begin to go wrong?

When did the crisis happen or begin? What is the timeline or sequence of events that led to the situation?

Where did it happen? Is the crisis contained within one location or multiple sites? Can that location be secured immediately?

As much as possible, the aforementioned and any other relevant details should be known so that when the Crisis Communication Team convenes, they will be able to act with an appropriate level of knowledge regarding the situation.

Convening the Crisis Communication Team

The Crisis Communication Team must convene in order to discuss the implementation of the necessary steps outlined in this section based on the circumstances and to coordinate with the Crisis Management

Team. Throughout a crisis, the teams will meet frequently to review new facts and actions, to assess what key messages are needed and if these messages are reaching audiences as intended, and to determine how to re-approach the situation if necessary. Frequent communication among the teams and resource persons are therefore vital so as to be updated and ahead of the situation. In the initial meeting, the team must already be aware of their roles and must be prepared to act quickly, but carefully.

Considering the needs of stakeholders

The University is committed to being compassionate, and thus, in the aftermath of the crisis, it is vital that the University be sensitive to the needs of administrators, faculty, staff, and/or students who may have been affected. Hence, an open line of communication between those affected and those making decisions is necessary (Coombs & Holladay, 2010).

Aside from the requisite medical aid that the University's Health Service and Hospital are prepared to administer, there may also be a need to assist these stakeholders by offering counseling services. The Counseling and Career Center, in cooperation with the Office for Student Affairs and the respective faculty/college/institute/school for students and the Human Resource Department for employees, may take this initiative.

In the event of loss of lives, reaching out to the family of those bereaved without delay is also fitting. Representatives from the unit of the bereaved as well as case relevant officials or administrators are encouraged to show their genuine sympathy. Flower orders on behalf of the University or a specific unit may also be arranged and coursed through the Office of Public Affairs.

By centering the response to the University's core values of compassion, competence, and commitment, and considering the needs of stakeholders as primary, the University may have a greater chance to retain the trust and confidence of both stakeholders and the public.

Monitoring media coverage

While the Office of Public Affairs regularly monitors media mileage and other coverage, in times of crisis, both traditional and social media monitoring become more vital.

Coverage of the crisis must be consistently tracked and monitored to know which publications, news stations, or influential people publish articles, air broadcasts, or issue comments that: align or do not align with the facts; are inflammatory, neutral, or sympathetic; have verified or unverified sources; publish/air sections of or the entirety of the official statement(s); and publish/air interviews or comments from University-affiliated people.

A summary of the articles/broadcasts/comments that fit the aforementioned criteria would help the Crisis Communication Team to be aware of the public and media sentiment as well as develop a more appropriate strategy for responding to the crisis.

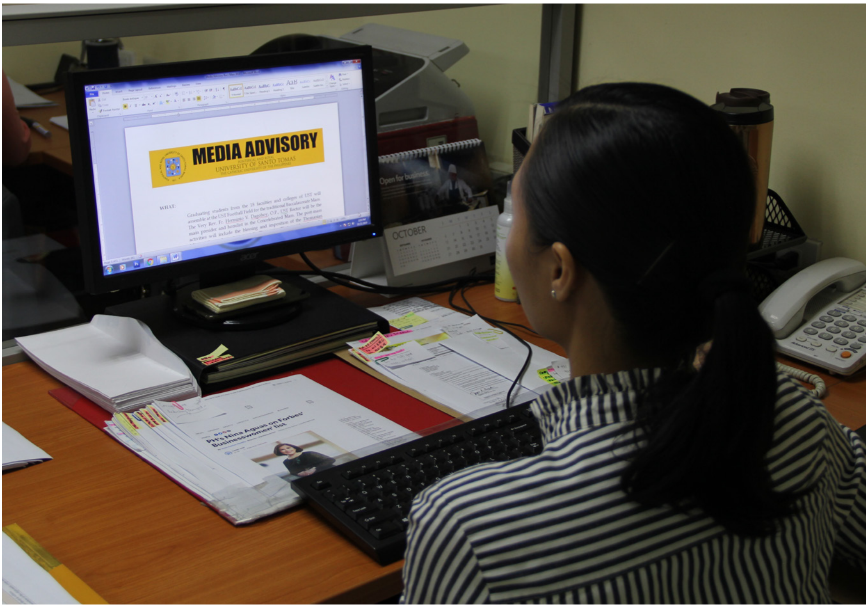
A summary of the initial coverage would be particularly helpful in determining how the media is framing the incident, and will be of help in ascertaining the key message that the crisis response, especially the media statement, should focus on.

Monitoring traditional and social media coverage as the crisis is ongoing will also keep the CCT and stakeholders informed of how wide-spread the statement/s has reached and assist in planning for further points of action, such as an additional statement, an interview with a spokesperson for the University, or other similar strategies.

Drafting a media statement

A media statement is the initial and official release of the University regarding crisis. Hence, this statement should be the first priority in a crisis, especially a PR crisis. While the drafting is primarily the responsibility of the University's legal counsel, it must first go through review of the Father Secretary-General before requesting for the approval of the Father Rector. Once it is approved by the Father Rector, it may then be sent to the Office of Public Affairs for dissemination.

The statement should focus on a key message while displaying certainty, compassion, concern, collaboration, and control (Wright, 2017).



Briefing internal stakeholders

Once the Crisis Communication Team has convened and determined their next actions as well as drafted a statement, the internal stakeholders, especially administrators and academic officials of the University, must be briefed on how the University is managing the crisis response and how the crisis would affect them. It would be more courteous and respectful if the internal stakeholders were informed directly by the University rather than letting them find out through the news. This is especially true if the information includes names of injured or missing persons. Their families must be the first ones notified.

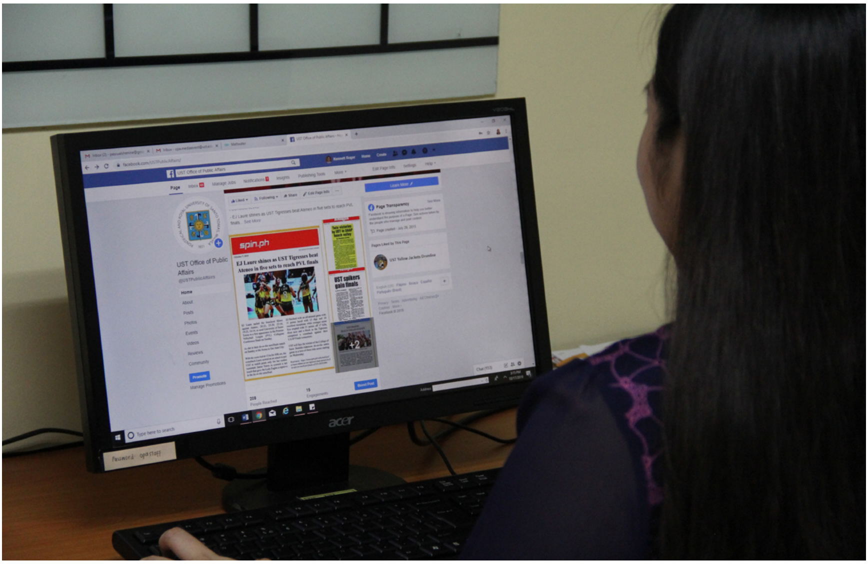
Internal stakeholders are the ones directly or indirectly affected by incidents within the University (e.g. administrators, academic officials, faculty members, support staff, students, parents and guardians of students, residents in neighboring streets, and the like). The person tasked to keep these stakeholders informed must consider what and how much information is needed, and how they can be reached in case of a crisis that compromises conventional communication systems.

Managing online public sentiments

UST's official social media accounts are at the forefront of the University's online presence, and the easiest avenue for the general public to connect with the University. It is therefore inevitable that there will always be discontented or occasionally mean posts directed at the University's social media networking accounts, whether there is a crisis or not. The key to managing online public sentiments is to know when and how to respond.

The UST Communications Bureau is responsible for response protocols for the official social media network accounts of the University. However, for other units within the University with social media arms, Baer (2012) shares the following guidelines:

- Acknowledge the crisis briefly and express that an official statement is forthcoming, and/or include other sentiments that confirm that something is being done to solve the crisis.



- Respond quickly but decisively through a post, especially if most of the criticism is coming from online avenues. The sooner the knowledge and responsibility of the crisis is acknowledged on social media, the lesser the chance of the University and its unit appearing uncaring.
    - This post also gives the advantage of allowing commenters to vent on a thread that can be monitored and moderated for spam, profanity, and other abuse. If a post like the aforementioned is not provided, it gives the public and the stakeholders the impression that the University is deaf to the sentiments of others, and will instead create other posts of complaint, which are out of the control of the University.
    - Aside from making the conversations about the crisis easier to track and moderate, it is also a warning system for potential new dimensions of the crisis (such as misinformation about the situation spreading), and it gives supporters and sympathizers of the University a place to defend UST and give testimonies of trust.

- Create a FAQ page for the crisis. By gathering information about the crisis in one place and updating the page as the situation develops, responding to inquiries becomes easier due to being able to just send the link. It also shows that the University is consistently keeping a close eye on developments, manifests the University's transparency, and assists in the prevention of misinterpretation of responses or statements.
    - This FAQ should include:
        - details of the occurrence
        - documents, photos, or other proof, if applicable or available
        - person(s) alerted to the crisis, along with when and how the alert came through
        - specific actions taken in response to the crisis
        - potential effects and other warnings
        - steps taken to prevent future occurrence of the crisis
        - contact information of the spokesperson or other relevant point of contact
- Make summaries and copies of relevant tweets, status updates, comments, that pertain to the crisis.
- Send thank you notes/e-mails/messages to the supporters who were vocal in their defense of the University

Planning for further media contact

In a crisis, media, both news and social, play a pivotal role in the court of public opinion. Their influence in shaping how stakeholders and the public think, feel, and act about the University's reputation can assist the CCT. Having good media relations can therefore be of crucial help in crisis situations. The University, presenting itself through its spokesperson, must manage its dealings with media carefully. The following sections discuss some approaches.

Unifying the voice of the University

In the midst of a crisis, it is all the more important for the University to be seen as a united front. To ensure such solidarity, no units within the University should release official written statements or interviews without being coursed through the Office of the Secretary-General and without prior approval of the Rector. The key message(s) decided by the CCT should be the main point of any other approved statement to be released. For offices seeking to contribute additional information, they must send the details in writing to the appropriate offices.

In line with the necessity for a unified message, there should only be one designated spokesperson.

The ideal spokesperson is media-savvy, charming, and has an established reputation for having integrity and competence in addition to clear communication skills (Adubato, 2008). Aside from the ability to conduct one's self in front of the media and press, the size and scope of the crisis will be the main determining factor in choosing the spokesperson.

As an exception for larger-scale crises, Jordan-Meier (2011) also proposes a dual or multiple spokesperson approach that may be considered by the CCT depending on the circumstances. This strategy involves pairing a high executive, such as the CCT Head, or Secretary-General, for instance, along with a media expert, such as the Director of Public Affairs, or the head of operations of the main unit involved in the crisis, or an expert who can answer relevant technical questions that may come up. The presence of the high executive sends two important implicit messages: that the institution and the executive care about what happened. The media expert, the operations head, and the technical expert will be there to deal with and explain the details, keeping in mind the key messages that the CCT has decided upon.

This multiple-pronged approach also accomplishes strategic delegation. Someone more knowledgeable regarding the crisis, but less charismatic may be asked to handle the print interviews, while someone more media-savvy could be the face of the University for broadcast interviews.

Preparing the spokesperson for interviews

A journalist's job is to seek the truth and be a skeptic; it is expected that they would ask tough questions, whether in print or broadcast. The validity of the spokesperson's claims will be tested, and the journalists will probe for more information in the hopes of finding who is responsible for the crisis, of resolving conflicting accounts of the situation, of achieving a balanced narrative that lays out all sides of the story, and of determining what exactly is being done to resolve the crisis or prevent the situation from happening again. Thus, whoever will be chosen to be in front of the media will need to be thoroughly prepared.

Before any interview or press conference, it may be helpful for the CCT to provide a brief info sheet that the spokesperson(s) can use to prepare. The interviewee must know who the audience will be, the key message that the University wants to impart, the relevant details of the case, and how best to present themselves to the media.

After the crisis is resolved, it is also beneficial, and even crucial, for administrators, academic officials, and other potential spokespersons to undergo media training seminars for professional development.

Training members of the Thomasian community to deal with media

University faculty members, employees, and other members of the Thomasian community must be informed that they are to give no details - if possible, not even their name should be mentioned during interactions to avoid being unwittingly involved in the coverage of the situation. They must be able to assure the journalist that their queries will be passed to the University-approved spokesperson who is aware of the details of the case and who will call back or speak to them when possible.

Employees must also be trained to ask the names and positions of the media representatives, which newspaper or broadcasting company they represent, their contact number, and the nature of their query. They must then give all the information to the authorized spokesperson.

Most importantly, persons in contact with the media, either through phone or personal visit, must remain polite and patient, even in difficult circumstances. No information, other than what the Crisis Communication Team decided to release, must be given.

Coordinating with external authorities

In certain situations, external authorities, such as the police, the NBI, or other government agencies, may request the release of confidential information, such as personal details of allegedly involved students or faculty members, campus CCTV footage, or other private details. The University understands that investigations are time sensitive, and in the interests of cooperation and pursuing justice, will work closely with these authorities provided that they go through the proper processes or University protocol.

CONCLUDING THE CRISIS

Once the crisis wanes, a debriefing must be done so that administrators, the Crisis Communication Team, the Crisis Management Team, and other persons of relevance to the situation may understand the sequence of events and actions undertaken as well as how the University will act to prevent such a crisis from occurring again. The crisis response must also be evaluated. As the crisis wanes further, the University must prove its commitment to rebuild and to reassure stakeholders and the public that it is deserving of retaining or regaining their trust.

Evaluating the crisis response

After the debriefing, an evaluation must be done not only to determine the effectiveness and efficiency of the crisis response, but also to reflect on what could be improved. The Crisis Management Team, Crisis Communication Team, including the administrators and other persons of relevance to the situation may discuss the **s**trengths, **w**eaknesses, **o**pportunities, and **t**hreats, of the response. Specifically on the area of crisis communication, Osorio (n.d.) poses crucial questions to ask during this evaluation:

- How could the crisis have been avoided or reduced?
- What worked well during the initial crisis response and what did not?
- How well did the University's existing operations, policies, and communication plan work?
- How could the University improve its crisis response protocols?
- How did the media coverage affect internal and external stakeholders of the University?
- How could media coverage be managed more effectively?
- Are there persons who stood out – positively and negatively – during the crisis response?
- How could the University better manage its resources during the crisis response?
- What other vulnerabilities toward crisis does the University have?
- What policies and protocols need to be revised?

Though it is difficult to evaluate the response due to some conflicting definitions and benchmarks of what success entails, McConnell (2011) proposes a definition of a successful crisis response: *"A crisis management initiative is successful if it follows pre-anticipated and/or* *relevant processes and involves the taking of decisions which have the effect of minimising loss of life/damage, restoring order and achieving political goals, while attracting universal or near universal support and/no or virtually no opposition"* (p. 68).

Depending on how the questions are answered and how closely the crisis response follows the definition above, the teams involved can more objectively evaluate the crisis response.

Rebuilding after the crisis

It is vital that the University stays involved after the crisis has waned by coming out with reassuring messages and other actions that prove its commitment to the well-being of its stakeholders. By taking this path, the University can better serve the community. Developing stronger ties with media contacts is also encouraged. Finally, in case future crises arise, updating the crisis communication plan with new insights and protocols that can better improve the efficiency of the University's crisis response is advised.

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